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ABSTRACT

The expression of modal meanings presents a difficulty even for advanced speakers of a foreign language and it has been shown that beginning and intermediate learners produce few modal auxiliaries. To investigate the phenomenon, a functional/semantic framework was used to determine what forms these students use to convey a particular meaning. The framework was based on Palmer's "Modality and the English Verb." In that book, two basic kinds of modality are distinguished--deontic and epistemic. Deontic deals with expressions of obligation; and epistemic, with expressions of probability. Interlanguage data for this analysis came from two groups of students receiving special instruction in conversational English. In one group the three speakers were native Japanese speakers; in the other group, there were two Arabic speakers, a Chinese speaker, and a Spanish speaker. Tape recordings made of free discussion and of presentations were analyzed by the teachers and by the researchers. A tally of forms occurring at least three times were subjected to further analysis. It was found that for each modal function, each subject seemed to have a preferred expression. Also, the ESL learners expressed only a limited number of functions. In conclusion, the advantage of the functional/semantic framework is stressed. Relevant tables are appended. (AMH)

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INTERLANGUAGE MODALITY*

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I began to look at the acquisition of expressions of modality when I noticed that even very advanced learners of English were using modals incorrectly. I was driving somewhere with a friend--a native Spanish speaker who speaks English almost perfectly. We were looking for a certain address, following the numbers on the street, and just where we would have expected the place to be, we came upon a driveway and my friend said: "That should be the place." Considering the circumstances, I was much more convinced that that was in fact the place and would have felt a lot more comfortable had she said: "That must be the place."

From my own experience learning other languages, I too had a lot of trouble when it came to expressing modal meanings. I had no problem expressing basic propositions, but making suggestions or giving personal opinion as to the expected probability of an event involved a greater amount of planning, as I tried to express in the foreign language what I knew how to say perfectly well in English. If then even advanced speakers have difficulties expressing modal meanings or select inappropriate forms for their expression, then what can be expected in the modal production of beginning and intermediate students?

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My experiences teaching and interacting with non-native speakers of English at the beginning and intermediate level showed that there were very few modal auxiliaries produced. Instead, modal functions seemed to be conveyed by other means--usually by forms external to the basic proposition. For example, probability and possibility were most frequently expressed by phrases such as I think and by adverbs such as maybe; conditionality was often expressed by if and the simple tense of the verb. [Halliday and Hassan (1976) have noted the similarity in meaning between clauses of report, condition, and modality. For example, there is little difference in meaning between: I think he's right (a report) and probably he's right (modality) or between let's suppose he's right (modality) and if he's right (a condition).] Since there were so few of the traditional modal auxiliaries, it seemed best to investigate the non-native expression of modality using a more functional/semantic framework in order to determine just what forms they used to convey a particular meaning.

The framework adopted is based primarily on the description given by Palmer in his book Modality and the English Verb (1979). He distinguishes two basic kinds of modality--deontic and epistemic (and a third, dynamic category which I will not consider here). Deontic modality deals with the expressions of obligation, as in "You must obtain a passport before traveling abroad." Epistemic modality deals with the expression of probability, as in: "Since this is a session of AAAL, most of you must be applied linguists." Palmer treats expressions with WILL and WOULD in a separate category, which I have done in this analysis as well. The problem with WILL and WOULD is that while the forms themselves are traditionally considered modals, they need not express the modal function and often express

solely future time as in: "The sun will rise at 6 A.M. tomorrow." The WILL here indicates an event that will take place in the future; it has nothing to do with probability; nor does it have anything to do with the exertion of one's will.

Within each of the major modal categories, there can be said to be three levels of strength. If you'll look at Table 1 on your handout, you can see the major functions and the forms used to represent them. Within deontic modality, for example (that is, modality of obligation), the strongest expression would be an obligation (represented by forms such as have to and need); the next strongest would be advice (represented by forms such as should and ought to); and the weakest would be either a mild suggestion or permission to do something (both represented by some form of can). Within epistemic modality (that is, modality of probability), the strongest expression is a logical deduction, the next strongest is probability, and the weakest would be possibility.

For the analysis, interlanguage data came from two groups of students receiving special instruction in conversational English. In one group were three speakers whose native language was Japanese. One class period (approximately one hour) was audio-taped during which the students introduced themselves to the researcher, spoke about their language background and difficulties with language production, and then discussed solutions to a set of language exercises that they had been asked to do. In the other group, four students (two Arabic speakers, a Chinese speaker, and a Spanish speaker) each made individual class presentations. These presentations were audio-taped by the regular teacher.

The researcher then listened to the tapes for any form that could in any way be considered an expression of modal function. These expressions were then placed into the modal framework as described above. The expressions included modal auxiliaries such as can, might, must; periphrastic verb forms such as have to, BE able to, going to; adverbs such as maybe; and main verbs such as allow, want, prefer. The teacher of each group was also asked to rate the students according to overall oral language proficiency. The total number of modal forms used by each student was determined. A summary can be found on your handout in Table 2.

The number of modals produced by the students in group one was not controlled for amount of time spent talking since the major portion of the hour consisted of spontaneous contributions to the group discussion. It is quite possible that the higher number of modal expressions produced by the student rated the highest by the teacher was a result of that student's superior language ability that allowed him to jump in and participate more often in the conversation. The number of expressions in group two was controlled for length of time of the presentation. Although the top-rated student also produced the greatest absolute and the greatest average number of modals per minute, the correlation between teacher rating and production for the other three students is not as clear.

In order to describe in more detail the modal production of these non-native speakers, the number of instances for each form within a particular function were tallied. Only those forms occurring at least three times were subjected to further analysis. The forms for each subject appear in Table 3 on your handout.

From this table, under the Deontic 3 category, it can be seen that 5 of the 7 subjects used can. Under the Epistemic 3 category, there was an overwhelming preference for the adverb maybe (proposition external) rather than the modal auxiliary might (proposition internal).

In general, for each modal function, each subject seemed to have one preferred expression. And the expression selected was not the same for all speakers of a language. For example, for the Deontic 1 category, one of the Arabic students used have to, the other used need; need was also used extensively by the Spanish speaker. For the Epistemic 3 category, one Japanese speaker used might, while the other two Japanese speakers and the Spanish speaker used maybe. [It might be interesting to speculate why certain forms were selected by certain speakers since the selection does not seem to be related to the speakers' native language. Andersen (1981) has already suggested that, based on Schumann's analysis of Alberto's production, speakers seem to select need because of the close similarity to the Spanish verb necesitar. The adverb maybe might have been preferred because of the level of the students: Lower level students are more likely to use expressions that are proposition external, a more pragmatic than syntactic form, as described by Givón (1979).]

In addition to having a restricted repertoire of expressions to represent each of the various modal functions, the ESL learners also expressed only a limited number of functions: of the 7 functions initially identified (3 each for deontic and epistemic, 1 for WILL/WOULD), 6 of the 7 subjects regularly expressed only 2 or 3 of the modal functions. Interestingly, however, one of the subjects--the most advanced (as determined by teacher rating) and the one with the greatest total modal production--also

had the largest repertoire of forms: J1 regularly used 7 different forms to represent 5 different functions (have to; should; can, could; maybe; would, then). In fact, this speaker was also the only one to use an expression falling under the middle strength deontic category, using should.

[Again, an interesting question might be why only this one speaker used the middle strength form of should. It seems likely that as a more advanced speaker of the language, he had begun to differentiate finer degrees of meaning. Other factors that would have to be looked into as possible explanations for the selection of some forms and not others would be: length of time studying English, amount of time in English-speaking countries, method of instruction, etc.]

In conclusion, I would like to go back to something I mentioned at the beginning, and that is, the need to use a functional/semantic framework for the analysis. Although several different modal auxiliaries were used (e.g. must, should, can, might, will), the investigation of these forms alone would have been insufficient for understanding what is going on in the modal production of non-native speakers. Only by looking at function as well could we learn of the importance of have to and need as expressions of deontic modality, of maybe as a proposition-external substitute for the modal auxiliary might, and of the several different forms used to express futurity and conditionality.

TABLE 1

Modal Framework

	OBLIGATION (DEONTIC)	PROBABILITY (EPISTEMIC)	
		Personal	Impersonal
(1)	have to ('ve) gotta need to V need N	BE sure	must definitely
(2)	should oughta ('d) better BE supposed to	think guess suppose	should probably no doubt
(3)	<u>suggestion</u> can could why don't? let <u>permission</u> can could BE allowed to may <u>ability</u> can could BE able to	NOT think	maybe might may could seems

TABLE 2

Total Number of Modal Expressions Produced

Group 1			Group 2			
Native Language	Teacher Rating*	Modals Produced in 1 Hr.	Native Language	Teacher Rating	Modals Produced (# Mins.)	Average Per Min.
Japanese	1	54	Arabic	1	27 (6)	4.5
Japanese	2	39	Spanish	2	22 (18)	1.2
Japanese	3	21	Arabic	3	25 (10.5)	2.3
			Chinese	4	18 (10)	1.8

*1 = highest rating.

TABLE 3

Modal Expressions Occurring at Least 3 Times for a Function

Function	Expression	Quantity	Speaker
Deontic 1	have to	6	J-2
	have to	3	J-1
	have to	7	A-3
	need	10	A-1
	need	7	S-2
	must	3	C-4
Deontic 2	should	4	J-1
Deontic 3	can	14	J-2
	can/could	9/9	J-1
	can	3	S-2
	can	6	A-1
	can	8	C-4
Epistemic 3	maybe	6	J-3
	maybe	3	J-1
	maybe	4	S-2
	might	3	J-2
WILL/WOULD	would	5	J-1
	then	6	J-1
	if	5	J-3
	want	8	A-3
	gonna	4	A-3
	will	9	A-1
	want	4	C-4